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SERMON,

ON THE

RETURN OF PLENTY.

PREACHED IN

TUNBRIDGE-WELLS CHAPEL,

OCTOBER 16TH, 1796.

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By MARTIN BENSON, M. A.

MINISTER OF THAT CHAPEL,
AND RECTOR OF MERSTHAM, SURRY.

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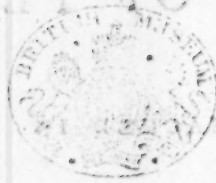
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MINISTER OF THAT CHAPEL
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S E R M O N.

EZEKIEL XIV. 13.

Son of man, when the land sinneth against me by trespassing grievously, then will I stretch out mine hand upon it, and will break the staff of the bread thereof, and will send famine upon it, and will cut off man and beast from it.

IT is a maxim, sanctioned by revelation, that when we labour *under adversity* we *should consider* : it is no less true or worthy of attention, that when we are relieved from adversity, we should be grateful and give thanks. But perhaps the best means of effecting this to a good purpose will be to endeavour to ascertain the source of the evil ; that we may profit by experience : and thence attempt

by an amendment of our ways, to avoid the calamity for the future. That we have for the last two years experienced the avenging powers of God in a shape nearly approaching to famine; *that the staff of the bread of this land* has been broken, is a fact too evident to call for proof: the poor man, whose daily pay has been insufficient to provide him with this chief article of subsistence; and his richer neighbour, who has been summoned to assist him in his necessity, equally know, for they have felt it.

If there could have been a question, whether this misfortune had originated immediately from God, or from the combinations and artifices of sinful men, the deduction would have been the same. The mass of mankind have suffered; which could not have been the case, but through the permission of the Deity. Some, perhaps, will say, that it has arisen as a necessary consequence of war. In this, possibly, there may be some reason. Happy for man, although he suffers by it, if it is so: for any great additional evil, which tends to aggravate this calamity, may
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carry with it the blessing of making it less frequent, and deterring the Powers of the earth from having recourse to that last sad argument, the scourge of sinful nations, with difficulty, in any other shape, ever to be reconciled to Christianity. Those, therefore, who would evade the supposed chastisement, by placing it to this source, prove only, that we have been enormously sinful, and that we are doubly punished.

But it is in vain for us to deny, or to sophisticate. The calamity has been imposed upon us in an ordinary form : a succession of bad seasons, combined perhaps with some wicked artifice of man, reduced the stock in hand ; and one more than usually calamitous held forth a prospect, at which nature shuddered : an evil, however, which by the blessing of God is now bountifully removed. With the views we have before us, the retrospect will yield us no pain ; it cannot fail tending to our profit. From the text we learn the origin of the past calamity—*When the land sinneth against me by trespassing grievously, then will I stretch out mine hand upon*

it, and will break the staff of the bread thereof.

This evil hath befallen us : it could not have done so but by the sanction of the Deity : the inference therefore is safe—that we have merited the punishment.

It is not improbable, would those of experience and sagacity investigate, that some great national sins might be detected, which have thus drawn down upon us the avenging powers of the Deity. From this place, whence nothing but plain, palpable truths should issue ; such as must tend to edification ; and whence the jarrings of mankind should be noticed only as they can be reproved ; such investigations would be futile and misplaced.

The subject of politics, must always be esteemed unworthy of this place ; and rather the minister of darkness, than of Jesus Christ is he, who on such points dares abuse the commission entrusted to his care.—Those topics then must sleep. But individuals should consider, that as their aggregate number constitutes society, so their aggregate vices will make up the sum of what may be termed national sins. In this point of view, we shall
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be at no loss to detect sufficient reason, wherefore a national punishment should be imposed upon us.

The species of guilt, which is more immediately referred to by the denunciation of wrath in the text, was that, probably, unto which the Jews were always but too prone—forsaking the God, who dwelt visibly among them, to serve strange gods ; in other words, the practice of idolatry. Under the same rude shape and stupid form, the sin doth not exist amongst us ; but in one more seducing, and consequently more dangerous, I fear it doth. We fall not down in adoration to stocks and stones : but we are too apt to forsake the God of our fathers, and to become the idolizers of our passions, our pleasures, and our vanities.

We forsake, I say, the God of our fathers. But in what manner ? it may be asked. In a manner, I fear, to justify our apprehensions of his wrath. In proof of the charge of our forsaking God, we are naturally led to estimate our attention to the prominent branches of his service. The general tenour of our lives should constitute this service : and when-

ever we sin, it is probably because we fail in setting him and his commands always before us. But, that we may competently effect this, certain aids are obviously requisite; aids, unto which God himself, by the establishment of the Temple service; our Saviour Christ, by his observance of it; and his apostles, by recommending that we *forsake not the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some even then was*, give a sanction; amounting to such authority, as to entitle them to the peculiar distinction of God's immediate service. Doubtless, the main end of this duty is to give that honour to the Creator, which is due from the creature: and this will effectually point out the solemn and serious manner, in which it ought to be performed; a consideration, which proves how many persons might as well absent themselves altogether, as render the cold, slovenly, and impure service, with which reiterated instances present us.

But these engagements of public devotion, are further intended to impress on us suitable ideas of the Deity; of our dependence on him;

him ; of the obligations and perpetual prevalence of his service. Towards God, they are acts of allegiance—with respect to man, they are tests of communion, and bonds of peace. Where the consequence is perpetually exacted, it is obviously proper that we should constantly make application to the cause : this consideration will assert how unremitted should be our engagement in these duties, and how frivolous the excuses, which detach us from them ; frivolous as are the little incidents of common life, when compared to the vast events of history.

Now, let every one look into his own conduct : let him estimate the very weak excuses he has often made to himself for neglecting this duty—excuses, which he would not have permitted to interfere with any ordinary amusement ; and let him say, whether he has not himself in this particular added his mite, at least, to the nation's sins. But, as in this case we are estimating the aggregate of our wickedness, that we may infer God's justice ; we may, without any breach of charity, look to our neighbours, and examine
their

their conduct. And how many persons do we see, who apparently never think of God; never enter his house, or become partakers in his service; never, of necessary consequence, can engage in that solemn rite, which we are all positively commanded *to do in remembrance* of a dying Saviour; or can deduce that instruction and consolation, which, sooner or later, we shall all of us require; and which is to be derived only from a conscience, fortified by the word of God? Let it not be inferred that these words are spoken in relation only to one rank in life. The evil is but too prevalent in all. In the higher classes, however, *the crime* (for there I will venture to call it *a crime*) is most heinous: inasmuch as example tends to recommend and extend the practice. It is every where a fatal delinquency; as it is the forerunner, rather I fear it may be said, the consequence of many other fore evils! The secession of those in elevated stations is ordinarily the consequence of dissipated, vicious lives, which represent this duty as an interference with their customary pursuits and pleasures; or a gloomy service,

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as it assures them of the sad *error* and fatal consequence *of their ways* :—that of the lower classes, their propensity to devote a day, benevolently given them for rest, to the toil of intemperance, to the ruin of their own healths, and to the severe and lasting distress of their families.

This then, I will venture to observe, is a serious instance *of forsaking God*; consequently *of trespassing grievously against him*: perhaps, none other need be mentioned, as this in effect involves or leads to every other. It is melancholy to consider how very extensive it is in practice ;—a sin, swollen in the present day to the grossest outrage against decency and religion, and such as may well be denominated a national sin ; such as may justly provoke the vengeance of a great national punishment upon an inconsiderate people.

But if, from this species of *negative* offence, we proceed to investigate others of a more *positive* nature, I fear the aspect will prove sufficiently luring to induce upon us the apprehension, at least, of God's severest judgments. In reply to such observations, the
question

question is often proposed, whether the present age is more remarkably distinguished for its vices than many others which have preceded it? It is neither easy nor of much importance to resolve this question: for, by our own good or evil deeds we must stand or fall. In answer to the question, however, it may be observed, that of the practices of our own times we see the minutest particulars; whereas, of others, we can trace only a bold outline: and, as commendable actions are those, which are usually transmitted to posterity, it is to be fairly presumed that our estimates of past times, may sometimes exceed the bounds of their deserts. Possibly, had we sufficient data, we might trace in their manners evident causes of many of those vast calamities, which the page of history has recorded, without informing us of their origin. But the memories even of those, who have not yet travelled very far into life, may suffice to point out an advance of dissipation, and of effrontery in vice, which but a very few years since would scarcely have been credited. Deviations from accustomed manners

ners mark æras in the history of mankind. In the history of Rome*, the period of its decline is marked by the extravagance of diffi-

* This instance was referred to rather than one of more modern date, that no allusion should appear to be made to the current-politics of the day. It may now, in a note, be permitted to add, that the example of France may be substituted with better effect; inasmuch as we are sufficiently near to the scenes, which have recently taken place in that country, to have marked their origin and consequences. And whatever might have been the *remote causes*, which sapped the foundation of the Empire; there can be no doubt (with those who knew their manners) that the *accelerating cause* is to be sought in the *atheism and profligacy of the higher orders of the nobility*: a cause, which first rendered them despicable, weakened their influence, moral, religious and political; and thence led to their final degradation.—No radical defect in an aristocracy can from hence be maintained. The point demonstrated is its effect in the influence of example. A sacred deposit is entrusted to its care; which, if used with propriety, must tend to promote individual happiness and the general good: but, if abused, will unhinge society more effectually than the violence of the lower orders, or the systematic malevolence of republican adventurers. The example proves, that powerful engine cannot be neuter: if properly directed, it will answer its intended purpose: if misapplied, it will effect destruction to itself, and extend it to all its dependencies.

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pation, which pervaded the higher ranks ; a trifling, luxurious, factious spirit amongst the men—with the females, even of the higher orders, a profligate disregard to decency, putting the very name of modesty at defiance. Such was a prelude to the fall of Rome. In all particulars, it may be hoped, the parallel cannot be supported here.—*Lovers of pleasure* I fear, it must be allowed we are *more than lovers of God*. But there is also a form of pleasure which marks, and I will dare to say, stigmatizes the present age. A form, which levels rank, and confounds character. This is chiefly effected by the seducing, the contaminating vice of GAMING—a vice, which implies or leads to every other : a vice, to which, as the novelty of the present age, FASHION ADMINISTERS, AND EVEN RANK BECOMES THE PANDER*.

Some

* The following passage occurs in A TREATISE lately published by A MAGISTRATE, ON THE POLICE OF THE METROPOLIS, under the description of various *persons, who are supposed to support themselves in and near the metropolis, by pursuits either criminal, illegal, or immoral.*

“ Persons

Some of those who hear me, will know to what I refer :—it may be as well that others should remain in ignorance.

The file of our legal proceedings, which records in frightful and too frequent characters the arts of seduction, and the dissolution of the matrimonial bond, marks the issue of these scenes ; and will probably characterize this age, as the first of modern times, in which a sex, hitherto distinguished

“ Persons called *Black-legs*, and others profelyted to the
 “ passion of Gaming, or pursuing it as a trade, who are in
 “ the constant habit of frequenting houses opened for the
 “ express purpose of play, of which there are at least forty
 “ in Westminster, where *Pharo Banks* are kept, or where
 “ *Hazard, Rouge à Noir, &c.* are introduced. Of these
 “ FIVE ARE KEPT IN THE HOUSES OF LADIES OF
 “ FASHION, WHO ARE SAID TO RECEIVE FIFTY
 “ POUNDS EACH ROUT, BESIDES ONE-EIGHTH OF THE
 “ PROFITS : seven are subscription houses ; five have cus-
 “ tomers particularly attached to them, and thirteen ad-
 “ mit foreigners and every idle and dissolute character,
 “ who are either introduced or known to belong to the fra-
 “ ternity of Gamblers, where a supper and wines are al-
 “ ways provided by the proprietors of the house, for the
 “ entertainment of their customers.” 2000.—Treatise
 on the Police of the Metropolis. §. p. ix.

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for its modesty, could walk erect, unabashed at the loss of innocence, cherishing the hitherto deemed vain hope, that RANK COULD PALLIATE THE NAME OF HARLOT.

This I will venture to name as a great national sin; peculiar, in its extent at least, to this age. But it is an evil, which is not confined to the act itself; it is infectious: it hath its influence, and is frightful in its consequences. Rank is looked up to, and its example will prevail: the chief heinousness of the crime lies then in its origin. Vice, indeed, always degenerates, and becomes more savage and corrosive as it descends: and, as its issue may be different in such particulars, it varies in its consequences; and, if from motives of policy only, should afford serious matter for reflection to the higher classes. But as the frauds of the higher ranks, or the violence and depredations of the lower; the suicide of the noble, or the execution of the peasant have originated from the same source (although diverted into separate channels) they each flow into the same vast gulph, and swell the tide of ONE GREAT NATIONAL SIN.

I might

I might pursue this topic to various other points, all tending to prove, that as a nation, we have abundantly sinned; and consequently that we are strictly deserving of punishment. No man, who reflects but for a moment, can doubt it. No man, who estimates the unparalleled prosperity, with which we have been formerly blessed, the unexampled stores of divine bounty, which have been showered down upon this happy land, and thence turns to contemplate our abuse of it, our wanton application of prosperity, and our various misuses and perversions of abundance, but must allow, that although many exist among us, who deprecate such conduct, and testify that *the works of our merciful and gracious God ought to be, and are had in grateful remembrance*, still, as a people, sin has prevailed among us; that it has greatly preponderated, and now actually operates to our disgrace. We have been chastised: we must confess our having deserved it. We are now relieved from a part, at least, of the penalty. By an acknowledgment of its justice, and by gratitude for the mercy, let us

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endeavour, through an amendment of our ways, to guard against its future intrusion. It had been a pleasing circumstance, could we have reflected, as we celebrate the return of favour, that the transient chastisement had been well received, and that it had, in its consequences, led to a return from the evil of our ways. In the private walks of life it is to be hoped that such has been the effect; in the more elevated and public, the amendment has certainly not been so great as the friends of decency and good order might have desired.—In another, wherein the community at large have had their share, only by suffering, the movement has been altogether retrograde.

It is certainly to be apprehended, that although the past calamity originated in the just judgments of God, it has in some instances been aggravated and swollen beyond its necessary size, through the ravenous artifices of sinful men. The thirst of fordid gain has been gratified at the expence of human comfort; and man has been pinched in his necessities amid comparative abundance. But
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the evil draws to a conclusion : and it will become us to reflect, that God makes use of such instruments of punishment as he pleases; and sometimes the severest inflictor is man, himself. But let such persons reflect, (for, as even this place has felt the partial misery, some of the instigators of it may be present here) let such, who thus have proved their alliance with the avenging powers of darkness, know that over their heads hangs damnation of no ordinary form, the punishment allotted to the enemies of their species—EVER-LASTING WRATH. But this class of our fellow-creatures must be small, although their powers have been too extensive. However, more pleasing matter of contemplation awaits us. But in this further estimate we step on perilous ground. Rarely is it safe to flatter man that he has performed his duty : but if we can discern it satisfactorily, with the view of inducing him to persevere, even his good deeds may be recorded. And it may with all proper humility be observed (may it also have been observed and recorded in heaven!) that the calamity has generally

been met with a Christian spirit: by the affluent with an unparalleled liberality, by the poor with meritorious patience and submission.

This is a consideration, which, although it must not be noticed as palliative of those sins, which have provoked vengeance, is doubtless worthy of attention, as the means of inducing all to a perseverance in a proper line of duty, of recommending practices of charity to the rich, from the gratitude which has hitherto requited their bounty; and of representing to the poor their happiness arising out of disparity of rank and inequality in the distribution of affluence; which thus has constituted to them stewards against the season of necessity, friends in the hour of danger.

To the rich another topic of exhortation arises out of this subject. When public calamity called upon them, they testified an honourable readiness to forego many of those luxuries, to which they had been previously accustomed. Were they less happy in their forbearance? I will venture to say, no. They
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have then informed themselves of the additional means of extending blessings to their fellow-creatures. Let them now remember that all necessity is comparative; and that future attention to the same duties will well become them as members of society, and entitle them to the praise and blessings of their fellow-creatures, to the rewards of christianity.

On the other hand, we cannot be too earnest in recalling to the attention of the poor how generously their more affluent neighbours have yielded their assistance under the pressure of the calamity. Some will perhaps doubt the truth of the assertion. Some, indeed, may not have experienced it; for as the modest sufferer frequently courts obscurity, and the clamorous can never be satisfied, so cases will occur to contradict general opinion and experience. But the poor should recollect that although little may have flowed from the rich man in the shape of voluntary charity, (which is far, very far from having been the case) yet in proportion to his wealth, at the dictate of the benevolent

nevolent laws of our country, he has contributed ; and that in a proportion frequently so abundant, as to have left him little or nothing *for the free-will offering of his hand*. And yet scarcely a murmur has been heard from this quarter ; good having converted the exacted gift into a voluntary boon : and the poor have eaten the bread of cheerfulness, flowing from a cheerful charitable source.

But although these are circumstances, which may be noticed with profit, as arising out of THE CONSIDERATION, which is recommended to us under adversity, with a view to the amendment of our ways ; it is not to be supposed that they have been the sole means of averting the calamity, or that they can guard us from it in future. No : our misdeeds have prevailed against us ; and *unprofitable servants* as we are, will probably in time to come. But it is our comfort (and may it ever prove so) that we have a *Father which is in heaven* : a father, *who knoweth our necessities before we ask, and our ignorance in asking* :—a father, *who giveth his blessings without measure*, who accepteth the
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imperfect offerings of sincerity, and ever listens to the prayers of faith: who *sendeth rain on the just, and on the unjust*; who even in his judgments remembereth mercy; and who, after having *afflicted us for a season*, now showers down upon us his loving-kindness and good-will, making our *vallies to stand so thick with corn, that they have laughed and sang*.—Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be the praise!—Unto his name be the praise!—Let us remember that gratitude is due from us: and that the best means of testifying our gratitude will be by a careful attention to the future accomplishment of his will. In his house let us praise, laud and magnify his holy name: by the purity of our lives, by the *harmony* of our actions, in our justice and benevolence, let us shew that we own allegiance to him; that we look up to him alone as *our strong hold, the rock of our defence and our might*; and that we hope for his future mercy only as we adopt his precept, imitate his love, and copy his example!

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 listens to the prayers of faith: who sends
 rain on the just, and on the unjust; who sows
 in his judgment, and increases his mercy: and who,
 after *Lately published, by the same Author,*

shows down upon us his loving-kindness
 and goodness, and sends down his peace
 to them that love him, that they have longed
 for. — I have said, O Lord, not unto us,
 but unto thy name be the praise: — I unto his

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